

GCSE
Music
8271/C

Report on the examination

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Context

This year was the second series in which centres were required to upload their GCSE Music NEA coursework samples digitally on Centre Services. Centres were very responsive to this requirement, and once again most did not have any issue with the new portal. Despite some occasional labelling, location and missing documentation problems, nearly all problems were dealt with promptly when centres were contacted.

Moderators observed that the overall standard of composition remained consistent with that of last year's. Many outstanding compositions were submitted, reflecting the dedication, effort, and support of music teachers, and an achievement that is truly commendable. There were some notable examples of excellent work from a range of students with some pieces transcending far beyond the requirements of GCSE level.

The requirements for May 2025

Students were required to submit **two** compositions: one based on a choice of four set briefs and the other a free composition of their own choice. Together, the two pieces needed to have a minimum total duration of **three** minutes and demonstrate the use of at least **four** musical elements, two selected from each of two separate prescribed lists.

Compositions were of varying lengths and most met the minimum duration requirement. However, a small number of students composed strictly to the minimum length (i.e. ninety seconds per piece), and in such cases, the music often lacked sufficient development.

Free and brief compositions

As in 2024, the four composition briefs were broad and varied, offering students a well-rounded selection to suit different interests and abilities. Brief 2 was the most popular choice, followed by Briefs 1, 4, and 3.

In Brief 1, students were tasked with composing a piece of music for a video game centred on the theme of flying. The brief included a notated stimulus featuring five pitches, with students instructed to compose in the suggested key while selecting any suitable rhythms of their choice. A few outstanding compositions fully embraced the video game genre, drawing clear inspiration from both contemporary video game composers and retro gaming styles. In submissions that included a score, the use of the stimulus was generally identifiable through analysis of the notation. However, in a small number of aural guides, the stimulus, the key, or both were unclear, and the stimulus could not be identified from the screenshots or annotations provided. Additionally, some Programme Notes offered minimal, or no explanation of where or how the stimulus had been used or developed.

Brief 2 was the most popular choice among students. The task was to compose a piece in response to a visual stimulus consisting of a short, thirty-eight-second film clip titled *Remembering*. The quality of submissions varied widely, though many compositions were well aligned with the brief and showcased a diverse range of creative interpretations. The film clip served as a useful stimulus for shaping students' ideas, and it was evident that many enjoyed the opportunity to craft a piece around their own narrative. Stronger students made effective use of the stimulus, demonstrating clear purpose and intention. In a few Programme Notes, students described how personal experiences and memories had influenced their creative

choices, which added some depth to their interpretation of the brief. In contrast, less successful compositions often relied solely on the title without fully addressing the intended audience or context. In rare cases, students either composed a piece matching the exact length of the film clip - resulting in a very short and under-developed composition - or produced a soundscape lacking the necessary musical development to achieve marks in the higher bands.

Brief 3 was the least popular choice and featured a stimulus based on the poem *The Orange* by Wendy Cope. A key requirement of this brief was that students compose their piece for voice(s). There were many creative and original responses to the stimulus. The strongest entries either set music to the entire poem, used selected phrases from it, or combined their own lyrics with lines from the poem. All these approaches were valid interpretations of the brief. However, a small number of students did not follow the requirements correctly, as they did not include any voice(s) and instead used the poem solely as an instrumental stimulus.

Brief 4 required students to compose a piece of music to accompany a radio advertisement for a holiday resort. This year the work submitted featured a range of genres and musical styles, with many students thoughtfully incorporating the geographical aspect to produce unique and individual responses, including fusion styles. Submissions were a pleasure to moderate, with the most successful students delivering appropriate and, at times, highly musical interpretations. Compositions often drew inspiration from Area of Study 3, highlighting Caribbean music, with several deserving marks in the higher bands. The less successful compositions occasionally resembled backing tracks and lacked sufficient development of musical ideas to merit marks in the higher mark bands.

It was encouraging to see many centres continue to support students in composing both the brief and free compositions across a wide variety of styles. In addition, some submissions featured students who composed both pieces in the same style, which is perfectly acceptable. However, there were rare instances where students from the same centre followed a **formulaic** pattern, such as using identical structures, keys, or similar melodic shapes and phrases. It is essential that centres provide students with the freedom to compose music for every part of their submission, allowing them to choose an approach that suits their individual style and effectively reflects the intended purpose of their music.

This year, a small number of students overlooked key details in both the first and third briefs. Centres should ensure that students **read each brief carefully and follow the instructions precisely**, as any oversights may result in marks being adjusted by AQA.

Centres should be cautious about the use of **pre-recorded loops** found in music software, as incorporating such loops (or any pre-existing musical material) is not permitted. Students working in styles where looping is common must be encouraged to **create their own original loops**. It is important that the aural guide or annotated score document is used by students to clearly demonstrate the tools and methods they employed to create these loops themselves.

Coursework receiving high marks was achieved by students using a wide variety of instruments, styles, and genres, including but not limited to:

- Brass Ensemble
- Instrumental Solo with pianoforte accompaniment
- Fusion
- Jazz Ensemble
- Orchestral
- Popular Song
- Pianoforte Solo
- Rock
- Small Ensembles (i.e. Trios, Quartets and Quintets)

Musical features for students to consider further

The use of the musical elements and their success was partly influenced by the choice of brief and the specific elements it suggested. For instance, many students responded effectively to the notational stimulus in Brief 1, created a well-defined sound palette for Brief 2, composed effective melodies for Brief 3, and selected appropriate timbres and rhythms for Brief 4. Common compositional weaknesses included ineffectively managed melodic and harmonic dissonances, where the melodic line did not align well with the supporting harmonies, over-repetitive harmonic progressions, underdeveloped melodic ideas, and the misjudged use of chord inversions.

The following list outlines a range of similar musical features that were observed last year. A more confident understanding of these features was required from some students within the context of the compositions they produced this summer.

- Chords and treatment of their varied positions (i.e. root, 1st and 2nd inversions etc)
- Harmonic progressions and their suitability to support a melodic line
- Instrumental pitch range
- Melodic shape, structure, design and development
- Rhythmic devices and development
- Tonality and modulation
- Use of a clear, concise structure
- Use of cadences

The Candidate Record Form

For each composition, students add the following details to the Candidate Record Form:

- Specify a **suggested audience or occasion**
- Select at least **four** types of musical element
- Describe any help given while writing the composition
- Write a **150-word Programme Note** to explain the intention, to describe how the composition was created and with which software or hardware, and to give more detail about the chosen musical features

On page 2 students **must** include a suggested audience or occasion for their free composition. However, some offered only vague responses such as *“for home use”* or *“to be*

performed outside," or left this section blank. These types of answers lack specificity and should be avoided, as they make it difficult to assess whether the music is appropriate for its intended purpose during moderation. Nearly all students selected two or more musical elements from each list and used them as the focus of their Programme Note.

On pages 3 and 5 students are required to explain how their compositions have been performed if they are **not** the performers themselves. This is straightforward to assess when a score is submitted, but in cases where no score is provided (such as with an annotation or aural guide), a detailed description **must** be included outlining how the student communicated their intentions to the performer. This information is essential, as it assures the moderator of the student's contribution to the performance.

The Programme Note

On pages 4 and 6 the following three bullet points are highlighted above each Programme Note on the Candidate Record Form and students are asked to respond to these:

- *the compositional intention, including the intended audience/occasion*
- *the types of musical element selected*
- *details of the software and hardware used in the compositional process*

Responses to this section of the Candidate Record Form varied widely. Some were incredibly detailed, thoroughly addressing all the questions and demonstrating a clear understanding of their chosen musical elements. However, others were too brief, consisting of only two or three lines, neglecting to answer all the bullet-pointed questions, or, in some cases, providing no Programme Note at all. There were instances where elements such as dynamics were selected, but no evidence of their use was found in the score or heard in the recording! Accounts that offer little detail on how initial ideas were created, do not reference the selected musical elements, or omit information about any software and hardware used, prove unhelpful during moderation. In previous years it has been suggested that to gauge if a Programme Note is of an appropriate length, students could read out their writing to their teacher before submission. It should be noted that the '150-words' should be used only as a guide.

In addition to the Candidate Record Form and to demonstrate the level of their musical understanding, students must also submit an audio recording and either a score, lead sheet and/or aural guide for each composition.

Audio Recordings

The quality of most recordings this year was excellent, including some lovely 'live' performances which were a pleasure to listen to. Centres should be commended on the quality of the work provided. There were some instances where recordings were too long as they had included a lengthy period of silence at the end, and rarely, where a recording of only one track had been submitted, rather than all tracks. The timings of each composition were calculated carefully so that any silence remaining at the end of the recording is not included in the total duration of the student's coursework.

The Score

The Candidate Record Form, audio recording, and Programme Note of the composition must be accompanied by at least one of the following documents, which serves as the most appropriate method to demonstrate the student's intentions:

- A staff notated score
- A lead sheet
- An aural guide

The notated score remains a popular option, but there has been a continued significant increase in the number of aural guides submitted this year. Some excellent examples of aural guides with annotated notes were received, with the best including the following information:

- Annotated accounted in the form of a '**log**' with timings that could be easily followed when listening to the composition
- Clearly annotated screenshots, **including** instrumental names
- A screenshot of the **whole** composition from the DAW outlining the overall structure (usually the first page)
- Additional screenshots of parts, including annotated notes written around the edge of the images to demonstrate specific features found in the music

Presentation is an important aspect of the aural guide. During moderation some difficulties arose due to the following reasons:

- Instrumental names were cut off or omitted
- The score is too small and difficult to read
- Some pages were uploaded sideways or upside down
- Pages were uploaded individually as separate documents, instead of as a complete, single document

Understanding assessment

Moderators reported significant variation in the accuracy of centre marking this year. While over half of centres were marked within AQA's tolerance standards, most of the remaining centres applied marks too generously, with a small number demonstrating considerable leniency.

As in the previous year, there was evidence that the upper marking bands (i.e., 18–16 and 15–13) were not always clearly understood. Music placed in the 18–16 band must exhibit consistently excellent technical and expressive control throughout and demonstrate a sophisticated level of understanding. Moderators often found that marks had been awarded in this top band even when some parts of the music were undeveloped, simplistic, or occasionally incoherent.

To assist with the assessment of work, **Teacher Online Standardisation (TOLS) materials are available in the Centre Services area of the AQA website.** These resources include examples of compositions spanning a variety of styles and all mark bands, making them invaluable for centres. If teachers require further support or have any questions about composition, they should contact their **NEA Advisor**. Additionally, they are encouraged to attend Curriculum Connect online meetings, including free drop-in sessions.

AQA published its **moderation guidance** in 2023 to provide support for teachers and students. The document covers a wide range of topics, including the process of marking, understanding the mark bands, what to look out for when marking coursework and what happens to the coursework when the samples are sent to the moderators in May each year.

Teacher comments

Teacher comments added to the Candidate Record Form about students' compositions play a key role in moderation, as they help justify the marks awarded by the centre and provide clear reasoning and supporting evidence.

It was noted that centres demonstrating a strong understanding of the marking criteria had likely made effective use of the TOLS materials to support accurate assessment. This year, the quality of comments was varied. Moderators once again reported that it was a pleasure to read some excellent and insightful remarks where compositions had been accurately assessed. However, less successful examples included minimal commentary or simply repeated the wording of the assessment criteria without explanation. In some cases, *no* comments were provided at all. Where centres were overly generous, this often involved placing students in the top mark band despite their work lacking the level of sophisticated understanding required, or awarding marks in the highly creative band for pieces that, while imaginative, still required further development to sound complete. Greater care should be taken to avoid using terminology from one assessment band while awarding marks from another, as this leads to inconsistencies in marking.

The following is a list of useful tips to aid centres with writing assessment comments:

- Use statements from the Assessment Criteria (such as 'highly creative' or 'secure creativity') and link these with supporting evidence from the composition.
- Always provide some examples from the composition to justify your mark.
- Ensure your evidence matches the mark band and the assessment statement within the band.
- Do not include details about the students' musical abilities as these provide nothing about the composition itself.

Administration

Uploading NEA coursework to the AQA digital portal was successfully managed by many centres and almost all preferred this new method. Where there were problems, such as inaccurate labelling of students' work and incorrect placement of documentation on the portal, these were overcome, and centres were very quick to respond.

Centres should be reminded the following **five** documents must be uploaded to the digital portal:

1. The Candidate Record Form
2. Brief score, lead sheet and/or lead sheet
3. Brief recording
4. Free score, lead sheet and/or lead sheet
5. Free recording

Any further files such as the *Performance Duration Declaration Form* must be uploaded under *Centre Documentation*.

Centres should ensure that all documentation is **checked carefully** before their submission is uploaded as any problems can cause unnecessary delay to the moderation process. The following is a list of issues which affected moderation:

- Marks uploaded entered on the centre marks submission did not match those written on the Candidate Record Form
- Samples were uploaded after the AQA deadline, causing significant delays to the moderation process
- Candidate Record Forms were unsigned by the teacher and/or the student (please note that signatures may be completed digitally)
- Files were inaccurately labelled; all labelling must follow the format outlined in the AQA digital guidance documentation
- Missing audio files, scores, Candidate Record Forms, and/or the Performance Duration Declaration Form (PDDF). The PDDF must be completed and submitted to AQA only when one or more students have **not** met the minimum duration requirement of three minutes
- Scores uploaded as separate pages, or incorrectly oriented (e.g. sideways or upside down) Centres should check all scores are compiled into a single, clearly presented document and correctly oriented before uploading

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website